



Janet Dysart's story of
Elizabeth



My favourite photo of my mother, Elisabeth, was taken in 1954, in Ceylon, just before she was to be presented to Elizabeth, the newly crowned Queen of England. My mother looks so happy and, as I have always remembered, beautiful. It was the most special event of her life.

Born to Herbert and Ethel Jarvis in 1916 in South Croydon near London, Elisabeth was the eldest child, followed by her sister Mervyn and brother Geoffrey. Her father was a public servant for the local council, and her mother had trained as a violinist and, before she was married, even joined the London Symphony Orchestra. However, when Ethel's mother died in childbirth, Ethel had to leave her career to look after her seven siblings.

My mother would tell me – with a twinkle in her eye – that she really did not enjoy school and was always into some kind of trouble. She had lots of energy, a great imagination, was artistic and was quite athletic. She loved the challenges of math and languages, becoming fluent in French and German, but was hopeless at history and English literature. I thought this strange, as later in life she loved to quote poems to us, especially from *Through the Looking Glass*. We would listen, entranced, to the story of the walrus and the carpenter crying and eating oysters.

In 1937, she enrolled in St. Thomas's Hospital Physiotherapy School in London, and it was there she met her best friends Kay and Anne. Many of the students and officers there were from noble families (Anne was daughter of Lord Farrer) and so, in the early days of the Second World War, Mother partied with the elite of London while the city was still safe. However, as the war crept on, all England came under threat of invasion. A bomb, meant for the Houses of Parliament opposite the hospital on the Thames, hit St. Thomas's instead, and one of her classmates was killed. The trainees were subsequently shipped out to a country hospital near Godalming, Surrey, to use their physiotherapy training on war victims.

It was in Godalming that my father, Arthur (Jimmy) Dale, visiting a fellow RAF pilot who was injured, met my mother. According to my mother, she had seen many men in uniform, but none so charming as my Irish father. They were wed in 1941. No white glamorous dresses in those times; she wore a suit and Father wore his uniform. Their honeymoon was short and after setting up house in Reading near London, my father was sent on flying reconnaissance missions to different parts of Europe.

Mother would often say, "As soon as your father returned I would be pregnant again!" She had three children in short succession. She told me that some hours before her labour began for my birth in 1942, she had eaten a few ginger biscuits. Once I was born, she looked at my titian red hair and yelled, "I shouldn't have eaten those biscuits!" Mother was ill with thyroid disease during and after her second pregnancy, so we had a nanny and our dear Granny to spoil us. We went to Granny's in the small seaside village of Felpham to escape the London area, which was being blitzed by the Luftwaffe. Then doodlebug bombs started coming over, and we were moved once again to Feltwell, away from the seaside.

When Mother was in labour with her third child in 1948, my brother and I were ill in bed with whooping cough. We were thoroughly bored, so we painted ink all over our bed sheets while listening to Mother in the next room. Post war, with the necessary food rationing continuing, she managed to feed her family of five. We also kept chickens and grew a vegetable garden for many years.

Elisabeth's husband belonged to an Irish teetotaler group. No surprise, as Father had grown up with alcoholism, in abject poverty and unemployment in Dublin. However Mother enjoyed a good glass of wine or gin and tonic, and Father never said anything about it, never would! We all had a good laugh about the time she attended the wedding of Father's cousin. She dressed up in her beaver fur coat, a very low-cut dress, bright red nail polish, lipstick and high heels, and, looking forward to some good wine and lively

company, walked into the reception only to meet the shocked faces of her husband's family. Such a brazen outfit on their cousin's wife!

Some years after the war, my Baptist born mother was dismayed to discover that my Irish Catholic father was not attending Sunday mass. Lord knows why! She decided that a Catholic priest should come and talk to her husband. This little event caused all of us, including my mother, to be converted to Catholicism. Clever priest; little did he know how much trouble this would cause in our future lives.

We moved so many times that Mother said she should never unpack, as the RAF would only move us again in two years. Father, as an officer, was allowed a "batman" who would help clean house or do the garden every day. Mother always felt he was in the way and would berate the poor man who did not want to be there anyway.

Washing clothes was hard work as the washing machine was very primitive. It did not spin and had to be hand-filled with water and then drained with a tube to the sink. Clothes were wrung through a dangerous wringer; Mother almost trapped my arm in it one day. Drying was done on a washing line, rain or shine. Even with the batman, the daily housework had to be done.

In 1952, Father was seconded to the newly formed Ceylonese Air Force to train the pilots and assist with management. Ceylon, nowadays called Sri Lanka, was described as a pearl drop in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The decision was made for the whole family to join him for three years. The social life of the colonies demanded very different talents of my mother. Life there meant always entertaining, managing servants who were either drunk or stealing or not doing their work as she required, and watching us wild children. It was hard also to keep up with the local gentry, which was for Elisabeth an unfamiliar role. She learned fast, was a good entertainer and soon became busy with engagements, while a nanny, or ayah, as they were called there, kept us at home out of mischief.

In 1954, the Queen was to visit Ceylon and attend a grand ball in Colombo in her honour. The women went into a frenzy, calling dressmakers and jewelers and learning royal protocol – how to curtsy to the Queen, how to respond when she spoke to you, even how to sit at the dinner table when she was present. Mother had a lovely, filmy evening dress in all shades of blue. She wore a brooch of gold and sapphires, also of two different shades of blue, which I possess now. All the ladies had to wear evening gloves. I can still smell her perfume when she came to kiss us all goodnight before leaving the house. She looked so beautiful.

Returning to England after life in Ceylon was, as Mother described, a huge shock. She called her time in Ceylon a "Fool's Paradise." Now that she had no servants, housework became drudgery. With the older children in school, she was able to return to work at a local hospital; another shock, as medical advances meant she had to update her skills. She confessed she was terrified by all the new machines and thought that maybe going back to work was a mistake.

Mother's sister had married an American doctor and moved to a fine life in North Carolina. Her brother Geoffrey had also married well and was an RAF pilot. Mother, despite being remarkably talented in her own right, felt bitter about her siblings' successes in life, something I never understood.

Then one day she met Winifred. This was the event that changed our family dynamics. None of us liked this woman who grew to have a Svengali-like hold on our mother. Winifred was a devout Scottish Catholic with a dour face and double-thick lenses in her glasses, which she wore on the tip of her nose. Mother became more involved in the church, almost using it as a crutch to stimulate her life. She joined an anti-

abortion protest group, even went on a march through town, feeling quite brave as there were naturally opponents to the march. She lined up Winifred's sons as prospective husbands for me. Father, against her wishes, sent my brothers to a non-Catholic school. Apparently she wouldn't talk to my father for ages after that!

As the first one to move away from home, I noticed on return that Father, retired from the RAF and working in a warehouse, had become more reclusive. They argued more, which he disliked; he just wanted peace and quiet. Mother played the piano less and less, prayed and went to Mass more, and priests often visited the house as friends. She was so changed from the lovely, free and happy woman I knew as a child.

When Grandmother Ethel died in 1970, my mother kept a lithograph that used to hang on her wall. In an ornate gilded plaster frame, it shows a carefree Edwardian woman at a seaside that looks something like Felpham. Mother loved it, as her mother had, perhaps as a memory of happier, carefree times.

As my mother aged, arthritis ravaged her hips and back, and pain control was not easy. Then multiple surgeries made her less active.

In 1981, Father was diagnosed with leukemia and quickly became extremely ill. Mother downplayed his illness, saying later she did not want us rushing home as that would make him realize how ill he was. Looking after him day and night she realized how much she loved him. My older brother and I were not told about his death until after the funeral. Years later, when I told her how devastated I was by this, we cried together. Not being a demonstrative family this was the first time she told me she loved me.

Winifred was still a dear friend, but was asthmatic and often ill herself. Finally, in 1998, diagnosed with cancer, she passed away. Elisabeth came to Canada several times and loved it, always wanting to enjoy the sea, the mountains and the lakes. She was very proud of all her eight grandchildren in Canada and England. I was grateful to see Mother coming back to her happier self and able to laugh again.

Her religion was her main comfort; home was the safe sanctuary. However, despite this, Mother understandably also struggled with loss: her husband, her independence, her beloved VW car, and her dearest friend. She compiled a family history photo album, was passionate about a TV math show called "Countdown" and was often taken to Mass by friends. A mild stroke caused "half" vision in both eyes and, sadly, no more piano playing. One evening she fell, a sentinel event, and was not found until the next day. Illness beset her, first her heart, then her lungs with pulmonary fibrosis, and soon came a private long-term care home which she disliked. Sadly the fall had signaled the end of a wonderful woman, my mother, Elisabeth.

When my youngest brother, still in the UK, asked me what I wanted of Mother's after she passed away, my answer was quick: Mother's stuffed black bear purchased on a visit to Nelson, B.C., her travel journals, engagement ring, and the lithograph of the girl on the beach. My "seaside lady" came to my house, and through it Granny and Mother are here with me now.